Programs and Services

Farm and Food Report, Week of March 5, 2007

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FORAGE SEEDING MADE EASIER WITH NEW INTERACTIVE CD

Matching the right forage species to your land and your needs is the task taken on by a project of the Saskatchewan Forage Council. The result is an interactive CD which guides the producer through the process.

"It's a tool for producers to take a look at different forage species, and make selections based upon their specific characteristics," Saskatchewan Forage Council Executive Director Janice Bruynooghe said.

"It looks at their land and soil characteristics, and also if they need something for pasture or if they want something for haying. They can basically define all the criteria for their specific circumstances."

Bruynooghe says the CD was made as user-friendly as possible in order to allow a series of choices that will lead to options.

"There is a whole database of information that will sort through all of the different species that we have adapted to Saskatchewan, and pull out a list for them that says what is suggested based on past research and recommendations from agrologists," Bruynooghe said.

"It's a nice way for producers to try to sort through a ream of information. We've put it all into a very user-friendly tool."

Most of the information on the CD originated with the Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food (SAF) Forage Crop Production Guide, which is updated annually by a Provincial Forage Crop Specialist. That base was combined with other scientific research compiled from across western Canada.

The CD allows the user to make their choices based on a long list of selectable criteria.

"There are up to 10 criteria that a producer could input. They could select all 10, or they might only use one," Bruynooghe said.

"They input their considerations and it will provide them with all the different species, whether it's for pasture or not."

In addition, the CD also provides a seeding rate calculator. Once the user has selected the forage species they want to seed, it will indicate the pounds per acre required of each species in the mix, and calculate a projected cost per acre.

Bruynooghe says the CD is not the "be-all-and-end-all" of forage crop planning, but it is one more tool to add to producers' other contacts, research and personal experiences.

Funding for the compilation of the CD came under Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada's "Greencover Canada" Program. However, a long list of partner groups participated in the technical committee, which advised the forage council on content,

including SAF, the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration (PFRA), Saskatchewan Crop Insurance and Ducks Unlimited.

"We've been at it for almost two years now," Bruynooghe said. "Those technical review committee members have been very important. We've filtered through the information a number of times, ground-proofing it and testing it so that the information is as accurate as we could possibly make it."

The CD will be available free of charge by mid-March, and can be obtained simply by calling the Saskatchewan Forage Council at (306) 966-2148. A downloadable version will also be offered on their website at http://www.saskforage.ca/.

An additional feature is the Forage Establishment Fact Sheet, a guide to the establishment of forage crops, which will be offered in a PDF format on the site.

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AG-WEST BIO TO HOLD BUSINESS PLANNING WORKSHOPS

Ag-West Bio Inc. will once again offer a complete business planning workshop this spring.

The workshop is in the form of three two-day sessions, scheduled in April, May and June. It provides expert instruction and hands-on support to entrepreneurs, whatever their stage of development.

"The material is relevant to new start up companies or existing businesses that are launching a new venture," Ag-West Bio Investment Analyst Tyler Bradley said. "It is aimed at companies based in agriculture, with a technological component."

The first of the three workshop sessions deals with the tools to get started in building a business plan. Participants receive a comprehensive binder of resources, including guidance on business planning and financial modeling.

From that starting point, attendees are asked to work on a more detailed plan before the next workshop.

About a month later, the second session provides feedback on the work done so far, and adds in information on business-to-business marketing, as well as some of the more advanced aspects of financial management and accounting.

The third workshop component provides time to adjust the financial pro-forma that has been developed, and on the last day each participant actually presents their own business plan to the rest of the group.

"We do everything in a very confidential, one-on-one environment," Bradley said. "We are aware that business people are very concerned with the confidentiality of their business concepts."

The three workshop sessions are scheduled for: April 16 and 17, May 15 and 16, and finally June 11 and 12.

The course outline promises plenty of time to be spent on the fundamental steps of how to prepare a business plan, and on financial planning and management.

Bradley says it is useful if participants can flesh out their business idea as much as possible before beginning the workshops.

"The more prepared you are going in, the further you are going to get," Bradley said. "If you can come up with a two-page summary of your concept, that's a good starting point."

The final session even deals with how to work on your new idea, while continuing in current employment or running your existing business. A seminar entitled "I can't quit my day job" will be kicked off by a guest speaker who has been through the experience.

The business plan workshop costs $575 for Ag-West Bio members, and $600 for non-members, and is eligible for coverage under the Canadian Agricultural Skills Service program. That price includes information binders and CDs, as well as lunches.

Bradley points out that, in addition to the learning opportunity, the workshop also provides exposure to potential sources of investment capital for entrepreneurs.

You can learn more at http://www.agwest.sk.ca/.

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WATER CONSIDERATIONS KEY FOR INTENSIVE HOG OPERATIONS

In the diet of a pig, like all living things, water is the most important nutrient. It makes up between 50 and 80 per cent of the animal's body weight. Water is also used to produce new tissue in growth and pregnancy, produce milk, and compensate for losses through respiration, evaporation and elimination of waste.

As a result, the amount and quality of water available to new and expanding pig operations is a very important step in the planning stage of an intensive hog barn. It can also be one of the most significant cost factors, both in terms of initial capital investment and ongoing operation.

"Water is a major influence in site selection, and should be considered early in the planning stages," said Troy Donauer, Livestock Development Specialist with Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food (SAF).

Today, more efficient pig barns use fewer resources to create the same volume of product. Water requirements will also drop as animal, equipment and nutritional efficiencies continue to improve through research and development.

Even so, Donauer says that the water needed for hog operations will always be a major factor. "Including sanitation, the average daily water usage in a farrow-finish operation is around 85 litres per sow," he noted. "Its importance can't be overstated."

Pigs perform best on good quality water, but are quite tolerant and can adapt well to various water sources. Animals of varying age and health status will react differently to the same water, with younger animals generally requiring a better product.

The quality of ground water in Saskatchewan is variable and site specific. The most common issues are high levels of iron and sulphates. Surface water is at a higher risk of microbial contamination from bacteria, viruses and parasites. Therefore, location is critical in order to avoid infiltration from manure, pesticide, herbicide or fertilizer. Water pipelines are becoming more widespread in Saskatchewan, and are increasingly becoming an option for hog operations.

"Testing the proposed source during the initial planning stages and routinely afterwards is the only sure way to monitor water quality changes," said Donauer.

But he notes that water considerations also factor into intensive hog operations on the waste disposal side, too. "The location of surface or ground water can affect site selection when considering manure storage and barn location," he said.

"Also, hog manure is made up of close to 90 per cent water, so its efficient use is critical in reducing the cost to haul it onto the land. With proper equipment and management, most hog barns can reduce the amount of water consumed by 25 to 30 per cent."

Because of their ability to affect water supplies through both volumes required and waste produced, intensive hog operations, like any developmental project, face a number of regulatory, licensing and approval provisions.

"Producers should definitely not begin construction or get too far advanced in their plans until they've checked out these requirements and obtained the necessary authorizations," Donauer said.

SAF has an Environmental Engineer and Livestock Development Specialists that are available to assist with the process of developing a hog operation, including site selection and navigating the approval process.

More information can be obtained by calling the SAF Agriculture Knowledge Centre at 1-866-457-2377.

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SHEEP AND GOATS CAN REDUCE LEAFY SPURGE INFESTATIONS

One of the worst weeds producers can find in their pastures is leafy spurge.

Leafy spurge is a vigorous competitor with valuable pasture plants, robbing them of water and soil nutrients. It grows rapidly in the spring, and can develop root systems 15 or more feet deep. Seedpods explode in the fall, propelling seeds up to 15 feet away. Seeds can remain viable in the soil for up to eight years.

Pasture owners that have leafy spurge on their property have reduced grass and legume productivity, reduced biodiversity in native plants, and decreased wildlife habitat. Property infested with the weed is less attractive to potential renters and land buyers.

Even worse, leafy spurge is unpalatable and potentially toxic to cattle and horses. However, Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food Forage Development Specialist Glenn Barclay says there are two species of animals that can not only withstand the weed, but thrive on it.

"Sheep and goats are not affected by the toxic, milky sap, and can readily eat spurge plants," Barclay said. "This fact can create a potential win-win situation for a land owner with a leafy spurge problem and a sheep or goat owner willing to graze his or her animals there."

But Barclay says there are many considerations for a sheep or goat producer to consider before grazing a pasture infested with leafy spurge. For example, transportation of a flock to a distant spurge-infested pasture can be costly. Predation losses from coyotes must always be considered.

A sheep herder also has to deal with the danger of accidents if they are working alone, endure periods of isolation, and incur living expenses being away from home.

Initial costs of buying and looking after herding dogs, as well as buying quads and trailers, are some other expenses that can also add up for a grazer.

Nonetheless, Barclay points out that arrangements which benefit both parties can sometimes be worked out. "The land owner who has a leafy spurge problem has to realize that there has to be some monetary gain for a sheep or goat owner to enter into a custom grazing agreement," he said. "In most cases, the sheep or goat owner has grazing options close to home."

Barclay says it is always wise for pasture owners and grazers with sheep or goats to negotiate a written agreement in order to avoid difficulties or disagreements down the road.

"A written contract will outline duties and expectations of both the land owner and the custom grazer, specifying details, such as animal take-in and take-out dates, which both parties agree to," he noted.

Barclay says it is common for land owners to be responsible for items such as adequate fencing, water, property taxes and adequate forage for the grazing period time. A land owner may want to specify that the sheep will be removed once the spurge

starts to flower, to eliminate the chance of seed transport.

"It may also be prudent to use sheep that are accustomed to spurge consumption, and in a long-term lease, the guarantee that these acclimated sheep will return," he added.

The sheep owner is often responsible for such items as predation losses, transportation to and from the site, health issues, death loss and flock maintenance duties.

Although grazing sheep and goats on leafy spurge infested pastures can achieve some positive results, Barclay points out that it will not eliminate the weed problem.

"Using careful planning, these animals will reduce the impact and spread of leafy spurge in the pasture," he said. "But regardless of whether a land owner is interested in getting into sheep or goats to help combat the spread of the weed, a plan to decrease and eventually eliminate the spurge should be made."

Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food is working with the Saskatchewan Sheep Development Board to develop a Fact Sheet that will provide further advice to producers who wish to enter into this type of arrangement. This Fact Sheet is expected to be available before the 2007 grazing season.

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